In this article I start with a contextualisation of development education (DE) (as I see it) and give a short presentation of what post-colonial theory (PC) is about. I then examine some implications of PC in terms of the agenda and critique of DE.

But before I start, it is important to mention that the terms North and South are used in this article strategically (to facilitate understanding) and the notion of ‘critique’ is not an attempt to expose errors but to engage with assumptions, contradictions and limitations: an exercise of enquiry that is both reflective (as it examines assumptions behind practices with the aim to prompt change) and reflexive (as it also analyses the assumptions and lenses of the observer).

**DE context**
From my perspective as a ‘Southern’ educator working in the UK, DE has a very distinctive focus. It is the only strand of education that organises itself around North-South relations and therefore is located right in the middle of local-global processes and debates. This location should force the field to attend to questions of power, politics, identity and culture – raising awareness and building skills to move the public beyond notions of the South based on compassion and charity, towards an understanding of interdependence that acknowledges uneven levels of power (Dobson, 2005), in order to promote a notion of responsible/accountable ‘global citizenship’.

However, DE is shaped by many factors. Organisations and practitioners have always found themselves struggling for time, funds and sometimes even audiences. As a result (and understandably), fundraising and the implementation of projects take up most (if not all) of practitioners time. Thus, DE has focused on ‘practice’ – a ‘how to’ approach – at the expense of DE thinking – or theory.

Thus, there is a lack of internal critique in the field and of dialogue with other disciplines where debates about globalisation, identity and global politics and development are in full swing. The area seems to be isolated and under-theorised, as McCollum pointed out in 1996: ‘The development education debate (...) remains at a superficial level precisely because there is little discussion of the theory implicit in the practice.’

Hence, dialogue with different disciplines can strengthen the basis of DE.

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**Post-colonial theory**
Post-colonial theory is the name given to a set of debates about North-South relations arising from various disciplines and ‘movements’:

- de-colonisation struggles and Southern responses and social movements challenging European domination (like those of Fanon, Freire and Gandhi);
- literary studies concerned with the representations of the ‘First’ and ‘Third’ worlds in literary and non-literary texts (like that of Edward Said) and
- recent debates in the fields of sociology, political theory, international relations and development and cultural studies triggered by new trends of discussion related to knowledge and power (e.g. Foucault, Derrida, Spivak and Bhabha).

PC is inter-disciplinary and provides links with practices of resistance: from grassroot struggles for independence to intellectual activism. However, as there are many strands within the field, PC is best described as a set of debates rather than a coherent theory as such. These debates question North-South modes of thought and power relations, as well as their effects on identities, social relations, politics and the distributions of labour and wealth in the world. According to Diana Brydon:...

...postcolonial thinking challenges the failures of imagination that led to colonialism and its aftermath, a failure that continues with globalization, but is now assuming horrific new forms. Postcolonial work involves re-examining the past to see where things went wrong and where they might have been set right, abandoning Darwinian narratives of progress for an openness to learning from other ways, not to return to the ways of the past but to imagine better ways of living together in the future (Brydon, 2005 p.4).

In this sense it shares with DE the search for a new globalism that has an ethical relationship to ‘difference’ and that does not reproduce the universalistic and oppressive claims of cultural superiority that were the basis of colonialism. On the other hand, like any perspective, PC offers a situated account of reality that is partial and shaped by its context of production, therefore it is important to engage critically with what it proposes too.

In summary, the PC set of debates:
problematises the representation of the Third World and issues of power, voice and cultural subordination/domination,
- questions notions of development and visions of reality that are imposed as universal,
- recognises the violence of colonialism and its effects, but also acknowledges its productive outcomes,
- questions Eurocentrism, charity and ‘benevolence’,
- also questions issues of identity, belonging and representation, and the romanticisation of the South.

PC and DE
PC focuses on the effects of colonialism on how people imagine themselves and the world. Therefore, it generates productive strategies and questions that can support the work of development educators in at least two important ways. First, it can provide triggers for critical engagement with perspectives and practices of DE. Second, it can provide an outline for an educational agenda that promotes a notion of citizenship that takes account of the cultural and material effects of uneven globalisation. I will illustrate the two dimensions separately.

Triggers for critical engagement
A central concept in PC is the idea of ‘alterity’ – or the construction of identities and ‘otherness’. This construction of self and other, within PC, is always ‘relational’: we create who we are (our identities), by ‘creating’ who we are not (otherness). This notion has several implications for pedagogical and political processes in DE. The analysis of assumptions of Figure 1 – taken from a DFID commission survey applied to schools – illustrates this point.

From a PC perspective, the greatest danger of this survey is not the reproduction of misleading assumptions about ‘Southern’ people or the self-interested tone of the question, but the effects on the construction of the identities of the ‘Northern’ people who are answering the survey. This reinforces the idea that Northern people are inherently good and peaceful (i.e. they do not create a lot of pollution or spread diseases and that they are entitled to a safe holiday abroad). This can create a sense of cultural supremacy which has numerous effects on relationships, the worth attributed to individuals, knowledge and power, the distribution of resources and wealth, and ideas about the origins of the problems, responsibilities and the ways to go about solving them.

Figure 1

| In which of these ways, if any, do you think that high levels of poverty in developing countries can affect us in the United Kingdom? By ‘developing countries’ we mean countries that are poorer than our own. |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| By helping developing countries involved in war/conflict | 37% |
| By increasing risk of diseases spreading in the UK | 32% |
| By increasing number of people from developing countries who want to come to the UK | 31% |
| By encouraging people in the UK to send money/aid to overseas charities | 31% |
| By affecting jobs in UK and the UK economy | 24% |
| By damaging the earth’s environment | 21% |
| By making foreign travel/foreign holidays more dangerous | 16% |

Base: All (2,709) Source: MORI
This process of creation of self and other has many implications for DE. For example, a very common effect of this is the drive for a ‘civilising mission’ of the North ‘educating’ the South in an attempt to solve their problems. This strategy is often linked to the idea of ‘making a difference out there’ and conflated with global citizenship in some mainstream educational practices that are categorised as DE (e.g. school links and fund-raising campaigns). The assumption behind this drive is that the ‘problem’ of developing countries is only based on a ‘lack’ of attributes that the North possesses (e.g. education, democracy, scientific knowledge, technology, a more civilised culture, history, universally ‘correct’ values, etc...) and that the North is responsible for the South in the same way that it was believed that the white men had the burden of civilising non-white peoples in colonial times.

In the period of colonisation, a local (European) set of assumptions of reality and of European supremacy was violently imposed on other people as universal (Bhabha 1994, Mignolo 2000, Bicccum 2002). From a PC perspective it can be argued that, in the same way, Northern people (those who can and do act globally) may become ‘global citizens’ by projecting their local as everyone else’s global (Dobson, 2005). Cultural supremacy is based on the premise that one has achieved a better, more developed and universal way of seeing and being and prompts patronising and paternalistic attitudes towards the South and Southern peoples, as well as a foreclosure – or necessary denial – of the colonial past and of causal responsibility or obligations towards the South. Without this understanding the argument for global citizenship is left to rest on notions of compassion, charity or a notion of ‘common humanity’ or ‘interdependence’ that do not necessarily address issues of power, inequalities and injustice. These are central issues both for DE and for post-colonial theory.

Another potential contribution of PC, arising from the concept of alterity is related to the notion of difference and diversity – and the debate around Southern Voices in DE. As we develop our notions of self in relation to others, our identities are always and already contaminated by difference and therefore ‘hybrid’. Thus, PC problemsatises representation and essentialism, which is the idea that groups/ethnicities have one or several defining features that are natural and exclusive to all members of that group/ethnicity. PC addresses the risks of homogenisation, oversimplified categorisations of oppressor/oppressed (and their inversions), romanticisations of the South and ‘identity politics’ (that can be power-seeking and exclusive).

In relation to essentialism and representation, PC prompts questions that can be useful to clear the space for dialogue in the DE debate on Southern Voices, such as:

- What do people expect to hear when they are listening to ‘the South’ or to ‘the oppressed’?
- Can the oppressed really say something from a space outside that in which they were constructed as ‘oppressed’ and given a voice?
- If given a voice, is the oppressed still ‘oppressed’ and who can (s)he represent then?
- What are the origins and implications of the desire to listen to a transparent, authentic and heroic representative of the South?
- How should we relate to these perspectives (as educators in educational processes and as citizens in political processes)?

As far as risks are concerned, PC may help us examine the dangers of speaking from a Southern position, like the romanticisation of national values (that may conceal internal racism), the commodification of difference – when ‘culture’ is packed and sold to a niche market (and may end up reinforcing stereotypes and racism) and of a new ethnocentrism (i.e. belief in the superiority of one’s ethnic group) that may reproduce a notion of ‘us versus them’, where us is associated with non-white/good people and them with white/bad people. A significant risk in Northern contexts is that this may end up ‘rewarding those who are already privileged or upwardly mobile, at the expense of the subaltern’ (Kapoor, 2004 p.631).

At the same time there is a clear recognition within PC that the solidarity of the North in the struggle for justice only makes sense in partnership and close connection with the South. So speaking as a ‘Third World Person’ becomes an important position for political mobilisation in many contexts today, especially where Eurocentrism prevails – but it becomes problematic when it happens to ‘tick the box of diversity’. As Spivak suggests,

...the question ‘Who should speak?’ is less crucial than ‘Who will listen?’ (...) the real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously; not with that kind of benevolent imperialism, really, which simply says that because that I happen to be an Indian or whatever.... A hundred years ago it was impossible for me to speak, for the precise reason that it makes it only too possible for me to speak in certain circles now (Spivak, 1990 p.59-60).

The major implication of this analysis for DE is that listening seriously and respectfully to Southern voices implies critical engagement on the part of non-Southern people with the individual perspectives presented – and not the passive acceptance of what is said by the Southern person as an expression of what the ‘oppressed’ continent, nation or ethnic group ‘thinks’. Here, an attitude of benevolence or fear to engage only obstructs real dialogue. On the other hand, a respectful engagement also implies a previous change of thinking and attitude in relation to the South that requires a change ‘at home’ and within. This
change is precisely what PC introduces as an educational agenda in the context of DE.

**An educational agenda**

In PC thinking, an ethical relation with the South demands critical literacy, ‘unlearning privilege’, learning to learn from below, and learning to live with uncertainty. Critical literacy is the ability to trace assumptions and implications: where one is coming from (origins of assumptions) and where that is leading to (implications of perspectives). Kapoor (2004) defines ‘unlearning privilege’ as the ability to,

...retrace the itinerary of our prejudices and learning habits (from racism, sexism and classism to academic elitism and ethnocentrism), stop thinking of ourselves as better or fitter [and refrain from] always wanting to correct, teach, theorise, develop, colonise, appropriate, use, record, inscribe, enlighten (p. 641).

Learning to learn from below is,

...a suspension of belief that one is indispensable, better or culturally superior; it is refraining from thinking that the Third World is in trouble and that one has the solutions; it is resisting the temptation of projecting oneself or one’s world onto the Other (Spivak, 2002 p.6 cited in Kapoor, 2004 p.642).

Learning to live with uncertainty refers to an openness to different and unpredictable outcomes that may emerge if one lets go of the will to always have power and control over interactions, encounters processes and spaces.

This implies that, in learning about or representing the other ‘over there’, careful scrutiny is needed ‘over here’ (ibid). Within PC thinking, the North does have a responsibility in relation to the South, but it is a ‘causal’ responsibility – as answerability towards the South, before will (Spivak, 2004). This involves an accountability for the effects of ‘Northern’ cultural and material violences. It demands a revision of ways of seeing and relating that have been conditioned by a colonial history and by asymmetrical globalisation, a process in which not only benefits are unequally distributed, but ‘the very possibility of ‘being global’ is unbalanced’ (Dobson, 2005 p.259).

**Conclusion**

In DE, a postcolonial perspective emphasises reflexivity, complexity, an ethical engagement with difference and critical engagement with assumptions that are hidden behind perspectives and educational practices. Postcolonialism does not give recipes, but it provides directions that point to a move beyond ethnocentrism and its claims of cultural supremacy, towards ‘planetary citizenship’ (Spivak, 2003) based on a deep understanding of interdependence in ‘material’ and cultural terms and causal responsibility towards the South.

My own interpretation of this agenda, translated to the DE contexts in which I work is that it is crucial to help people recognise and address complexity and causal connections in order to promote independent thinking and responsible action in relation to the local-global debate (a more detailed explanation of this can be found on the OSDE methodology website: www.osdemethodology.org.uk).

Post-colonial theory provides both an outline for an educational agenda and powerful and necessary triggers for an internal critique of DE. One of PC’s most liberating assertions is that we need to persistently engage critically with the spaces that we love and belong to in order to recognise their contradictions and limitations and clear the way for new things. However, it is useful to point out here that the idea is not that everything is negative and that we should run away from problematic strategies, but that everything is complex and dangerous (Foucault, 1983).

We need to ask how (or if) DE (with its current constraints) can create spaces where we, as development educators and our audiences, can be prepared to address these complex challenges and assume the responsibility for our local decisions.

**References**


**Vanessa Andreotti** is a research fellow and education/outreach coordinator of the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (School of Politics and International Relations) at the University of Nottingham. She also coordinates the OSDE methodology international initiative – www.osdemethodology.org.uk – in the area of development education. taxvoa@nottingham.ac.uk